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**‘Terrible Times Together’: Friendship and the Gift in the Poetry of George Barker, W.S. Graham, Dylan Thomas and Vernon Watkins**

*The circulation of goods follows that of men women and children, of festival ritual, ceremonies and dances, jokes and injuries. Basically they are the same. If things are given and returned it is precisely because one gives and returns ‘respects’ and ‘courtesies’. But in addition, in giving them, a man gives himself, and he does so because he owes himself – himself and his possessions – to others.*

Marcel Mauss.<sup>1</sup>

I

‘Portrait of a Friend’ is one of Vernon Watkins better-known poems. This is partly because the friend in question is Dylan Thomas. Not that it is Watkins’s only poem on or for Thomas: Watkins’s widow, Gwen, has found enough to produce a whole volume of *Poems for Dylan*.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the others, most of which date from after Thomas’s death, are nowhere near as good nor as interesting as this poem written when Thomas was very much alive and when Watkins, though the elder poet, had yet to publish his first book.

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<sup>1</sup> *Marcel Mauss*, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Trans. Ian Cunnison, Int. E.E. Evans-Pritchard (London: Cohen and West, 1966), p. 44. Throughout this article, I shall be drawing on Mauss and other theorists of the gift in an attempt to provide correlatives and context for the lives and poetic practice of neo-romantic poets. At the same time, I do not pretend to be offering a scholarly anthropology of old Soho, a work of anthropological theory, nor indeed a comprehensive view of gift-exchange among poets.

<sup>2</sup> Vernon Watkins, *Poems for Dylan*, (Llandysul: Gomer, 2003).

In February 1938, Watkins had sent a Jack-in-the-Box to his godchild, Thomas's son Llewellyn: a small, unremarkable act of generosity, but one from a man who, though only a bank clerk himself, was remarkably generous to Thomas and his family, and who routinely answered Thomas's requests for money. This time, for once, Thomas had a gift to give in return, a photograph of himself posing with a cigarette and looking two parts Jimmy Cagney to one part young W.H. Auden. Thomas explained:

It's one of many: this is the toughest. Why I want you to think of me, – photographically, when I'm not about – as a tough, I don't know. Anyway, it's very big; you can write a poem on the back draw whiskers on it, or advertize Kensitas on the front window.<sup>3</sup>

The envelope wasn't big enough and the picture got cracked and crumpled in the post.

Thomas's gift is self-deprecating and self-absorbed, friendly and provocative. It is mindful of Watkins's own urge to write and Watkins's reactions, but it also wants to be the centre of Watkins's attention. One suspects Thomas knew perfectly well this note and picture would provoke a poem and that this poem might tell Thomas what Watkins made of him. Was Watkins, who had had a psychotic episode which led to an attempt on the life of his old headmaster, a secret tough himself despite his pacific otherworldly demeanour? How would Watkins's idealisation of poets cope with the poet as a puffing hoodlum?

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<sup>3</sup> Dylan Thomas, Letter of 7 February 1938, *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, ed. and int. Vernon Watkins (London: J.M. Dent and Sons and Faber and Faber, 1957), pp.35-37, p.36.

Not much of a one for cigarette ads or graffiti, but ever grateful for an excuse to pen a poem, Watkins responded to the invitation to write (the photograph stayed untouched). ‘Portrait of a Friend’ begins:

He has sent me this  
Late and early page  
Caught in the emphasis  
Of last night’s cartonnage,  
Crumpled in the post,  
Bringing to lamplight  
Breath’s abatement,  
Over- and under-statement  
Mute as mummy’s pamphlet  
Long cherished by a ghost.<sup>4</sup>

As Watkins put it when introducing Thomas’s letters to him: ‘Dylan delighted always to express himself in extravagant statement’, and ‘Over – and under – statement’ is an apt description of the poem’s mode as well as its subject.<sup>5</sup>

After the matter of fact first three lines comes the ‘cartonnage’. If you didn’t know what the word meant and guessed, the context would make it read as an odd way of describing Thomas’s working his way through a carton of cigarettes. Cartonnage, though, is the plastered layers of fibre or papyrus used in mummies’

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<sup>4</sup> Vernon Watkins, *The Collected Poems of Vernon Watkins*, (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1986 & 2000), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid..

casings. Watkins has transformed photograph into ritual death mask of the 'late' poet. In the fifth line, the apparently subjectless 'Bringing to lamplight' conjures a picture or mummy studied beneath the lamp, the reader being invited in the tomb while Watkins plays Howard Carter, yet what is in fact studied under lamplight is the lighting of a cigarette, the breath of a noisy lively poet drawing on a smoke.

Watkins wasn't always to acknowledge how Thomas's extremes of expression and extremes of behaviour were connected, yet 'Portrait of a Friend' turns no blind eye:

draw from their dumb wall  
The saints to a worldly brothel  
That a sinners tongue may toll  
And call the place Bethel.<sup>6</sup>

Despite an urge to overstatement that can implicitly believe in *unworldly* brothels, Bethel's ladder and angels, have not drawn up from the world and the flesh. In the last stanza comes the injunction:

The superhuman, crowned  
Saints must enter this drowned  
Tide-race of the mind  
To guess or understand  
The face of this cracked prophet,  
Which from its patient pall

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

I slowly take,  
Drop the envelope,  
Compel his disturbing shape,  
And write these words on a wall  
Maybe for a third man's sake.<sup>7</sup>

The neo-romantic pun may allow the poet to have a simultaneously high and low diction, to be both vulgar and wayward and fastidious (Geoffrey Hill can be considered, in this and some other respects, the last of the neo-romantics). This 'crowned' may refer to being knocked out in a brawl; 'cracked' could describe the literally cracked face of a crumpled picture as well as the fact that Watkins's friend could act as if mentally unstable. There is little doubt that a 'drowned/ Tide-race of the mind' is in part drowned the way one's sorrows are. The language of the pulpit both judges and justifies the actions of a sinner. The poem comes with accoutrements of the funeral, puts Thomas into his pall, addresses the ancient Egypt-loving Thomas like one dead (elsewhere in the poem he is depicted in 'tombs' and with 'grey dust'), yet is no elegy but a deathrite for an undead poet.<sup>8</sup>

'Portrait of a Friend' may not be to modern taste but is, to keep with the punning, a compelling depiction of Thomas, writing large what happens in Watkins's first collection, *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems*, a book both enthused and disturbed by Thomas, his rumbustiousness, earthiness, and Egyptology. It belongs to the same imaginative universe as Watkins's 'The Mummy', another arcane account of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 20

the persistent visionary undead whose last verse contains once more the death of a friend:

What shudder of birth and death? What shakes me most?

Job his Maker answering, the Stricken exclaiming 'Rejoice!'

Gripping late in the shifting moment giant Earth, making Earth a ghost,

Who heard a great friend's death without a change of voice.<sup>9</sup>

What is original and interesting in a poem such as 'The Mummy' owes much to the friendship of Dylan Thomas; what is unoriginal comes from the poetry of Yeats – the 'shudder of birth and death', for instance, is too beholden to the 'shudder in the loins' of 'Leda and the Swan'.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, if the Yeats influence does appear benign and well-managed, it is precisely because it is tempered by the influence of Watkins's friendship with Thomas; it is only when Thomas's influence and friendship wanes that Watkins's devotion to Yeats as a master becomes a bore.

Not only does the case of Watkins and Thomas present a problem for inter-generational critical models of influence, even the less-theorized models of collaboration or competition among contemporaries don't quite encompass the complex poetic relationship that brought 'Portrait of a Friend' and other poems into being. One of the Thomas poems 'Portrait of a Friend' recalls is 'It is the Sinner's Dust-Tongued Bell'. The recalling is not quite pastiche, nor will influence or allusion properly answer as a description. One reason for this is that Watkins was in on the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>10</sup> W.B. Yeats, *The Poems: Revised*, ed. Richard J. Finnerman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p.214.

genesis of 'It is the Sinner's Dust-Tongued Bell', so when 'Portrait of a Friend' calls to mind 'dark directly under the dumb flame' it recalls his and Thomas's friendship through the creation of poetry quite as much as it is enacting the more usual relations between prior and subsequent poems<sup>11</sup>. In a BBC broadcast of 1958, Vernon Watkins remembered:

[Thomas] came to my house one day and he said, 'I've been reading a thriller, a very bad thriller, but I came on the most wonderful line in the middle of a lot of trash, which was "the shadow" is dark directly under the candle'. And he said, 'Out of that line I'm going to make a new poem which is going to be my best about churches'.<sup>12</sup>

In this as in so many other Thomas poems, its gradual movement towards completion involved sharing it with Watkins.

The poetic relationship between Watkins and Thomas was then a two way process, no less complex than was their friendship. This would have been even clearer had Thomas bothered to keep Watkins's letters to him, but the evidence of Thomas's letters alone is substantial. Of course, his friend's influence might go too far at times – Thomas bemoaned how the last line of the title poem of *Deaths and Entrances* contained 'zodiac', 'a Watkins word' –, nevertheless the superior craftsmanship of that book when compared to Thomas's earlier work owes much to Watkins's example

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<sup>11</sup> See, 'It is the Sinners' Dust-Tongued Bell', Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Walford Davies and Ralph Maud, (J.M Dent: London, 1996), pp. 71-72.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Walford Davies and Ralph Maud, (J.M Dent: London, 1996), p. 221. The connection is also noted in *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The New Centenary Edition*, ed. John Goodby (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), p. 325



and advice.<sup>13</sup> As Thomas's influence had a habit of making Watkins more distinctly Watkins, so Watkins's influence is behind some of what now seems quintessentially Thomas. Thomas and Watkins shared poetic goals and an imaginative universe, of Swansea, the Bible and ancient Egypt.

To put it another way, they exchanged gifts. Thought about like that, the other gift-giving in their lives can be seen as less one-sided. Money wasn't anything like so important to Watkins as poems were. Until the time came when Thomas ceased to offer criticism for Watkins (a change which, tellingly, coincides with Watkins's going into print with Faber and Faber), there was something like a fair exchange of gifts. After all, as Watkins acknowledged, Thomas had the greater gift to bring to the ceremony. It was only when that stopped that the ever-forgiving Watkins could be entitled to feel aggrieved, and that his readers could miss the early excitement of his work.

Dylan Thomas's eventual biographer, Constantine FitzGibbon recalled how Thomas read 'Portrait of a Friend' to him one night in Spring 1944, closing the book and remarking, in an entirely matter-of-fact voice: "And of course the third man, Constantine, is you'", a happening which FitzGibbon was to recall as ghostly.<sup>14</sup> But really, this was a further bond of friendship among the living. Watkins, before publishing books, wasn't necessarily going to get a readership beyond Thomas himself, so it seems fair to conclude that the third man is the putative further reader, to whom Thomas's ways are being justified. Reading Watkins and Thomas, is to be an initiate in arcane private ceremonies. It is also like being brought into a group of friends.

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<sup>13</sup> See Gwen Thomas, *Portrait of a Friend*, Int. Paul Ferris (Ceredigion: Ylolf, 2005), p.92.

<sup>14</sup> Constantine FitzGibbon, *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (London: J.M Dent, 1965).

## II

After encountering 'Portrait of a Friend', one is tempted to feel a little sorry for Vernon Watkins receiving through the post, say, 'Birthday Poem' only to discover that no, Thomas hasn't got the date wrong, he is once again off singing and celebrating himself. Yet, there is little doubt that Watkins would have preferred what he got. At one level, many of Dylan Thomas's poems were for Watkins anyway, Watkins being the first, most trusted audience, the almost ideal reader. Furthermore, though both could and did produce it, neither Watkins or Thomas attributed much value to the sort of poetry that would contain the day to day material of friendship or the friendly letter.<sup>15</sup>

'Portrait of a Friend', then, manages a problem. Most friendships, and most friendship poems, have plenty of space for the quotidian and the seemingly unpoetic. Watkins had a friendship with Thomas that included laughing at Timothy Shy's columns in the paper, going to the pub or playing croquet. But high neo-romantic poetry is not like most friendships. Turning their backs on the social and sociological concerns of the Auden group, the neo-romantics also renounced ways of incorporating friendships into poetry characteristic of Auden group verse while only half-heartedly appropriating grander Yeatsian models of celebrating friendship.

The neo-romantics had not that presumption of social importance that Yeats or Auden possessed. Their backgrounds were less privileged, their educations briefer (Watkins, who went to Repton and walked out of Cambridge, was, in this as in other

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<sup>15</sup> In Thomas's case, the poem posthumously collected as 'New Quay' beginning 'Dear Tommy' and addressed to T.W. Earp has all the banter and booze of the pub and *Under Milk Wood*. Dylan Thomas, *The Poems*, ed. and int. Daniel Jones (Bungay: J.M. Dent, Everyman, 1982), p. 179.

cases, a partial exception to prove the neo-romantic rule of thumb). Lacking the status attached to social role or political mission, their exaltedness came from playing the poet as priest. The role may have given them a mystique in the eyes of some, but this did not mean that poetic worth equated with financial worth. True, at times they were beneficiaries of some old-style patronage, as was the case with Dylan Thomas with Margaret Taylor. Later on, George Barker took posts in universities; W.S. Graham received money from the Arts Council and the Civil List. But, for the most part, neo-romantic poets had few of the new or old financial safety nets for poets, yet were forced to have to appear untrammelled by the materialistic world and free from other work (Watkins again was the exception). This meant relying on the kindness not so much of strangers as of friends.

Written in such circumstances, a gifted poem no longer functioned as a singular and gratuitous present but became situated in a system of reciprocity that would include poems alongside other gifts, financial donations included. This helped make gift poems peculiarly attractive and useful to the neo-romantics. It lent their poems of friendship some of the particular flavour that makes them read differently from those by other sorts of twentieth century poets. It also meant that the poems of neo-romantics were forced to negotiate differing conceptions of value. After all, to put poems into circulation as gifts amongst other gifts is to entertain the notion that the worth of poem might be contingent, practical and quotidian rather than simply intrinsic, unworldly and timeless.

. The presence of a gift economy amongst poets is talked up in avant-garde groupings. It is implicitly there in the way Frank O'Hara and the New York Poets would write poems for one another; it is explicitly theorized by poets of the

Cambridge School.<sup>16</sup> Yet it is theorized as an ideal which is counter to economic reality and to any way someone might exchange goods or keep themselves alive. Pierre Bordieu, otherwise so clear-eyed on gift exchange, partakes of this idealism when he writes:

The World of art, a sacred island systematically and ostentatiously opposed to the profane, everyday world of production, a sanctuary for gratuitous, disinterested activity in a world given over to money and self-interest, offers, like theology in a past epoch, an imaginary anthropology obtained by denial of all the negations brought about by economy.’<sup>17</sup>

Without denying the importance of such an ideal, it is worth bearing in mind the reality. Even the poetry of Cambridge poets has effects within the real economy: writing that sort of poetry, having those sorts of friends might, for example, be helpful or disadvantageous in getting a job teaching in a university. Moreover, the realities and compromises of art can be as revealing, and sometimes as inspiring, as its ideals.

Lewis Hyde neatly summarises a divide between the gift economy and the money economy: ‘Because of the bonding power of gifts and the detached nature of

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<sup>16</sup> For an explicit linking between Gift Theory and Cambridge School poetics, see Simon Jarvis ‘Soteriology and Reciprocity’, *Parataxis, Modernism and Writing*, 5 (1993), pp. 30-39; and ‘Prosody as Cognition’, *Critical Quarterly*, 40:4 (Winter 1998), pp. 3-15.

<sup>17</sup> According to Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The World of art, a sacred island systematically and ostentatiously opposed to the profane, everyday world of production, a sanctuary for gratuitous, disinterested activity in a world given over to money and self-interest, offers, like theology in a past epoch, an imaginary anthropology obtained by denial of all the negations brought about by economy.’ *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 197.

commodity, gifts have become associated with community exchange and being obliged to others, while commodities are associated with alienation and freedom.’<sup>18</sup>

What is so liked and so lamented about money as a medium of exchange is its impersonality, its indifference. Gifts, however, continue to have something of the giver. Outside utopia, there is something to be said for this: you pay me twenty pounds for my old lawnmower, and, other things being equal, no further obligations are necessary: the twenty pounds disappear into my wallet; we both feel I’ve earned the note and I can do what I like with the money while you can mow your lawn. If I donate the lawnmower to you, or you simply give me the note, things are more complicated: mower or twenty pound note cement a bond and are imbued with a sense of obligation. Friends, of course, do this sort of thing all the time, and the patterns of obligation are not clear as they are in pecuniary contracts. A friend might not only feel that you’d do the same thing for her; she might even be upset at the idea that she’d ever expect a thing in return. However, faced with such benevolence, the receiver of the gift may still feel obliged to give something in return or else feel worried at the unequal nature of the relationship, at being made to feel continually obliged and like a dependant. Given that gift exchange between Western friends lacks some of the clear etiquette governing appropriate responses to different people on different occasions that is understood within a formal gift economy, friends are as likely to lend money and lawnmowers as they are to give them.

In instances such as the example above, money itself can, when given, stop being affectless and impersonal. If the motives of the ‘friend’ are questioned, the

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift – How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2006), p. 69. Although, our interpretations of its role are at variance, Hyde’s work alerted me to the usefulness of seeing the poetic gifts in the context of gift exchange.

money can seem tarnished. This is what happens in the one serious poem by Dylan Thomas which does address friends. It was sent to Vernon Watkins in an undated letter of May or June 1939 which first discusses Watkins's criticism of his poetry, before demanding: 'We want a little poem for Llewelyn' (which Watkins wrote).<sup>19</sup> The poem is addressed to Watkins only by his explicit exclusion from being among the addressees ( it may have been a coded attack Geoffrey Grigson), and is, if interpreted generously, a tribute by omission.<sup>20</sup> It is called 'To Others Than You':<sup>21</sup>

Friend by enemy I call you out.

You with a bad coin in your socket,

You my friend there with a winning air

Who palmed the lie on me when you looked

Brassily at my shyest secret <sup>22</sup>

In the moment of disenchantment, friends are discovered thieves, forgers and conmen whose brassy dead eyes palm bad coin. The friend gives money, but, as the poem goes on to reiterate, the act of giving becomes an act of thievery through corrupted money.

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<sup>19</sup> Dylan Thomas, undated letter, probably of May or June 1939, *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, pp.66-69, p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> This identification is recorded by, among others, John Goodby in *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas*, p. 354.

<sup>21</sup> Dylan Thomas,, *Letters to Vernon Watkins*, pp.66-69.

<sup>22</sup> Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems*, pp. 89-90.

The poet though proclaims how, untainted by this bad coin, he has his ‘whole heart under your hammer’.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas’s words aren’t as winning as they might be: the one letter change from socket to pocket to make the surreal rejigged cliché (coins out of the pocket and into dead eyes) is Thomas at his more tricksily verbose, indulging the poetic equivalent of palming-off bad currency himself, and the poem is less obscure than it is confused, written to get problems off Thomas’s chest rather than sorted out. It is the product of a broader unease with the unsatisfactory mix of money and friendship in which givers do not give freely in the manner of Vernon Watkins but, like givers in gift economies, or apparent givers who turn out to be lenders, want something - the poet’s heart, his secrets, even his good behaviour – in return:

That though I loved them for their faults  
As much as for their good,  
My friends were enemies on stilts  
With their heads in a cunning cloud.<sup>24</sup>

Friends should do as I do, love for faults as much as good. False friends stand accused of not doing the same. The currency of friendship is indistinguishable from the currency of commercial exchange and, though the poet wants to offer the whole heart, the poet’s shyest secret might be that he must accept such bad coin.

If the logic of the poem is tangled, so too is the logic of a life that both wants to receive gifts and not to feel obligated. The poem is alerted to the knot of problems,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

but Thomas doesn't go on to write the sort of poetry that would attempt to untie them. Instead he characteristically represses pecuniary pressure and adult friendships and relationships by infant memory and bodily drives rather than, as most people do, doing the reverse. Thus, the blissful vision of 'Fern Hill' finds Thomas alone yet seemingly adored: 'prince of the apple towns' and 'lordly', aloof from all who might be more princely or lordly in adult life, glorying in when 'Time let me play and be/ Golden in the mercy of his means'.<sup>25</sup> The implied present though is no longer princely, but needy for the means of others. Only the child and the dead receive gifts and never have to give them. By repeatedly playing the role of each, Thomas also absented himself from the usual adult obligations.

Had Thomas lived, the greater thought he gave to family relationships might have been given in time to poems to friends, and, most likely, to elegies. But these exist only as counterfactuals. With the neo-romantics who lived longer, poems written to or about friends are a significant part of their oeuvres. True, some of this is the usual sort of thing written for to mark occasions to honour poets who live long enough: poems for sixtieth and seventieth birthdays, festschrifts and the like; more is elegy. However, there is a sizeable proportion of verse that is prompted by neither occasion.

The increasing numerousness of friendship poems of all sorts made them one of the defining types of neo-romantic verse, rather than the intriguing exceptions 'Portrait of a Friend' or 'To Other Than You' were when written. The desire to give serious attention to poems of friendship and gift-giving also evidenced a process of evolution, broadening and maturation amongst the neo-romantic poets. That said, the kind of problems that entangle 'To Others Than You' did not disappear; the force and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.134.



appeal of the hieratic and inwardly directed remained strong. Indeed, the tensions between sociable and exalted neo-romanticism, between intrinsic and extrinsic conceptions of poetic value, would provide the motor for a number of some of neo-romanticism's, most intriguing, and most affecting, poems in the years to come.

### III

*To refuse to give or fail to invite, is like refusing to accept – the equivalent of a declaration of war; it is a refusal of friendship and intercourse.*<sup>26</sup>

Before they met, George Barker wrote to Dylan Thomas in April 1937 suggesting they write each other verse epistles. On April 4, Thomas wrote back to agree.<sup>27</sup> The result was the poem originally entitled 'Epistle to Dylan Thomas'. Not really knowing Thomas, Barker tries to bond by talking money, or rather the lack of it:

It was hard cash I needed at my root.  
I now know that how I grew was due  
To echoing guts and the empty bag –  
My song was out of tune for a few notes.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> See Robert Fraser, *The Chameleon Poet: A Life of George Barker* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p 93.

<sup>28</sup> George Barker, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 94

‘A few notes’, songs and notes for poems, a paucity of banknotes, Barker was offering Thomas what he already possessed: penury and punnery and a commensurable straight swap. Thomas had little to gain from someone he did not consider his poetic equal and never replied. And, while he and Barker did their share of Soho drinking together, Robert Fraser biography’s characterisation of the pair as more rivals than they were friends reads convincingly.

George Barker’s friendship with fellow Parton Street Poet, and one time surrealist, David Gascoyne and its poetic record presents a marked contrast. Poems Barker and Gascoyne wrote one another could be years apart, and there was not, as with the proposed exchange with Thomas, an immediate expectation to respond. Poems appeared in different forms and guises, at the appropriate moment or at the whim of generosity. In this they fit Pierre Bourdieu’s characterisation of gifts and counter-gifts:

if it is not to constitute an insult, the counter-gift must be *deferred* and *different*, because the immediate return of an exactly identical object clearly amounts to a refusal (i.e. the return of the same object). Thus gift exchange is opposed on the one hand to *swapping* ... and on the other hand to ending...<sup>31</sup>

The first of these poems, ‘To David Gascoyne’, coincided with Hitler’s invasion of Poland. Barker and Gascoyne were near Hampton Court (Barker was later to puzzle Gascoyne by misremembering it as ‘Kew Gardens’ in another poem on the same

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<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Op. Cit. p. 5.

subject).<sup>32</sup> The poem fails to catch hold of the immensity of the coming conflict, in spite of, or rather because, of the immensity of its imagery:

This Caesar now steps down into our day,  
Striped like a sabre-tooth with blood and anger,  
Warsaw a fig in his jaw, death as his drummer,  
Messerschmitts on his lips ...<sup>33</sup>

Such lines do read like the common caricature of forties' poetry. Yet the celebration of friendship and the details of the day out come close to saving the poem, as do its particulars. Barker finishes:

Now I shall remember  
The Tudor Gardens, the girl-pleasing fountains,  
  
And I shall speak of love on every first of September.<sup>34</sup>

The proliferation of these more intimate and immediate notes give us glimpses of the better poet who would emerge after the war.

'At the Wake of Dylan Thomas' finds Barker writing of Thomas dead in a similar manner to Vernon Watkins writing of Thomas living, the belief in the eerie

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<sup>32</sup> There is an account of the meeting in Robert Fraser, *The Chameleon Poet: A Life of George Barker*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p. 171.

<sup>33</sup> George Barker, *Collected Poems*, p. 120

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

ability of poetry to survive death and let the poet have an afterlife, now achieving its logical conclusion:

But I have known, for a moment,  
The I undead and the dead who was my friend  
  
Change places. Thus, if this poem speaks  
A crown of joy or courage among cold rocks,  
It is his spirit that animates my language.<sup>35</sup>

As Barker states how Thomas was his friend, his next sentence talks of Thomas's poetic language rather than more conventional tokens of friendship. The reciprocal gift-giving of 'if this poem speaks ... it is his spirit that animates my language' is a depiction of poetic gifts. What is implicit in Watkins's relations with Thomas is made explicit here: such is Thomas's poetic gift, the literal gift of writing him a poem is insufficient recompense: Barker rends unto God or Caesar things already his, and what Thomas gets is less an exchange between friends than just tribute.

Contrast this with Barker's poems for a man who really did play the role of acknowledged superior and benefactor but who was counted by Barker as a friend. 'Elegiacs for T.S. Eliot', composed the day after Eliot's death, finds Barker writing: 'Myself/ I mourn an old friend, a mentor,/ And the man of moral example.'<sup>36</sup> Suitable words are then said of Eliot's literary achievement, yet as the elegy goes on, the 'old friend' comes to the fore; Eliot had, we understand, 'that sense of spiritual onus/

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.311.

<sup>36</sup> Barker, *Collected Poems*, p. 435

Inherent in Pascalian interpretations./ Also he loved bad jokes.’ To underline the point, Barker cracks a number, including a mock *Waste Land* footnote to a description of ‘his effigy serenely sleeping there/ in the Norman shadows of St Bartholomew’s,/ inexplicably and splendidly disguised as Rahere’ – ‘A resemblance which I have often noticed.’<sup>37</sup>

In life, jokes are an immediate gift-giving between friends. One makes a joke, the other responds with an immediate return gift, that of laughter. Jokes will also become a currency between them, bearing out Mauss’s contention that jokes are basically the same as goods.<sup>38</sup> Barker’s poem begins by showing formal obeisance; it concludes by showing a friendly bond. Barker’s belief in the appropriateness of such jesting in elegies, or of later writing a poem with the title ‘A Letter Addressed to the Corpse of Eliot’, makes an implicit challenge to the reader. Find Barker insufficiently grave or decorous and you’re squeamish, humourless, and no friend of the deceased: Eliot would have smiled and reckoned the corpse delightfully Jacobean, don’t and you’re an interloper at the wake.

That his art rarely got perfected didn’t stop George Barker believing the perfected art the thing, over and above the life. However, his imperfect art is made better company by the way the non-poetic parts of friendships bulk large in his later work. Indeed, friends who were not poets are quite as likely to figure in poems as friends who were, the life celebrated being, predominantly, the ruined life, the life loved for its faults. Friends have grandeur by being profligate, impractical and generous. If, as the puns so often suggest, money and poems are similar coin, the proper use of both was extravagance; Barker might not pay back in money, but he

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 436.

<sup>38</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 44.

could amply pay you back in words. No better is this shown in the work of 1973, *In Memory of David Archer*.

David Archer was that wonderful thing for anecdotes and that terrible thing to be, the great bohemian character. He reminded George Barker of a cross between Marcel Proust's Robert de Saint-Loup and P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster. Archer owned the Parton Street Bookshop and Press and its successors in London and Glasgow, which proved magnets for young poets and left wing intellectuals.<sup>39</sup> According to Dom Moraes, when customers came into Archer's shop 'Archer had an aristocratic prejudice against taking money from them, and he either recommended them to another bookshop down the road ("Silly me, I've got nothing readable here, really. The other shop's *much* better") or gave them books for free.'<sup>40</sup> The businesses folded, and Archer, who had a great love of giving people presents and money (often hidden in boxes of matches, which tended to get thrown away unopened) dissipated the family fortune.

For all that he was ridiculous, Archer was, after Eliot, the most consistent spotter of young poetic talent in England. The Parton Press printed first works by Dylan Thomas, George Barker, George Gascoyne, W.S. Graham and Dom Moraes. Archer may have achieved this without even reading them. Moraes recalls Archer's saying: "'Frankly, I never read a word they wrote. But I sensed then, you see, there was something about them ... I sensed they were good.'" <sup>41</sup> When Archer became a

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Fraser, *The Chameleon Poet*, p. 44

<sup>40</sup> Dom Moraes, *A Variety of Absences: The Collected Memoirs of Dom Moraes* (Penguin India: New Delhi, 1993), p. 280.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.291.

destitute, the generosity continued and he would spend his handouts on presents of flowers. He eventually killed himself with an asprin overdose.

*In Memory of David Archer* has a number of poems in Archer's memory, including the first, which contains the lament:

All the gifts of red  
roses and blank  
cheques and bed  
fellows grew rank  
and went bad  
and you and they  
sank down in the grey  
ends of a day  
that sank as it died  
in the guttering  
palace. I think  
that all you leave  
behind you in the evening  
is a darkened room  
empty save for old  
newspapers and cigarette ends  
and in the gloom  
the enormous gold  
urn of your heart

in which lie the ashes of your friends.<sup>42</sup>

If Vernon Watkins' poem is written to Dylan Thomas when still alive as a kind of death rite, here we have a poem to a man actually dead as if he were alive to hear it. The profusion of rhyme is attractive edging on excessive, as is the imagery – a 'guttering palace'? It is worth noting, though, how fitting it is to the extravagant, careless David Archer and how, in paying tribute to a Soho hero, Barker's style has a mimetic justification. On closer inspection 'guttering palace' is a compound image: the meeting of a guttering candle and a glittering palace; it also brings to mind life in the gutter. It forms a burnt-out pairing with 'the enormous gold/ urn of your hear/ in which lie the ashes of your friends', and this in turn brings to mind the ashes of Archer's own body and a gold ashtray where friends have flicked their fag-ash and are the fagends that they stub: at once a gesture of friendship and an imagining of its snuffing out.

Reading later Barker, or the later poems of his younger Soho friend David Wright, one may be forgiven for wondering why we should care a fig for all these doomed, and mostly fairly obscure, Soho characters. In 'On a Friend Dying' Wright asserts:

Larger in death, mythical, those figures,  
Yankel Adler, David Archer, Colquhoun and MacBryde;  
Not failed gods, because our gods were failures  
Standing in broken shoes with half-pints of Scotch ale.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> George Barker, *Collected Poems*, p. 577.

<sup>43</sup> David Wright, *To the Gods the Shades* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1976), p. 130.



But there are gods one has heard of and friends one has oneself, so as an explanation for why Wright and Barker kept writing about these people, it is less convincing than that proffered by Barker in 'Elegy' from his penultimate collection *Anno Domini* (1983):

It does not matter who they are, the lazy  
bones whom someone, somewhere, wishes  
back into those hungover and sleazy  
basements and bedrooms where they drank like fishes  
or those, loquacious with a glass in hand,  
who brought Pegasus into the Black Horse bar  
or a mermaid into Mooney's in the Strand.  
It does not really matter who they are.

All of us have had such friends and such  
intemperate or even temperate times.<sup>44</sup>

With Barker's friends not gods but friends among us, one can see his point.

#### IV

In Julian Maclaren-Ross's *Memoirs of the Forties*, Maclaren-Ross, sitting in a pub, tells W.S. Graham that Charles Causley had kindly donated a poem of his to be

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<sup>44</sup> George Barker, *Collected Poems*, pp. 735-736.

used as an epigraph in one of Maclaren-Ross's novels. Graham declares: "I will write you a better poem than that right now, and if you agree you can keep it for your very own."<sup>45</sup> This strikes Maclaren-Ross as peculiar and peculiarly competitive. However:

'Mrs Graham then told of her husband's secret desire to make a friend of me, until now frustrated by his Scottish pride and certainly hitherto admirably concealed: the gift of a poem was a gesture intended to consolidate this new relationship.'<sup>46</sup> Graham completed the poem, put it in an envelope and gave it to Maclaren-Ross.

Unfortunately, the Grahams then persuaded Maclaren-Ross to turn up unannounced at a party given by the painter and illustrator John Minton. Minton, for some reason, angrily threw Maclaren-Ross out, and Maclaren-Ross, who had paid for the taxis, ripped up the envelope in a rage. Subsequently, Maclaren-Ross could not be certain if there really was a poem in the envelope or merely some crowing over what was going to happen (Maclaren-Ross, though, strongly inclined toward the former belief).<sup>47</sup>

A competitive poem to make friends is first unopened and then torn up with the potential friendship. Graham does seem to have believed that poetry could be a friend-making thing from the off, or, if you assume the worst about his motives here, at least assumed it could be construed as being so. Yet just as the concealed poetry doesn't befriend MacLaren-Ross, Graham's obscurer forties work can appear stuck in its envelope. It may be somewhat anti-cartesian, in so far as it is fleshly and embodied or fractured or contradictory, but that doesn't mean it is not, in its own way, solipsistic, either uninterested in true communication or believing it too fraught to be

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<sup>45</sup> J. Maclaren-Ross, *Memoirs of the Forties*, introduction by Alan Ross, (Hamondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.185.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.188.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.190.

possible. As with early Thomas, wrought orality becomes that pleasing sound which communicates the gist of the private self without really reaching across to someone else, speech which is not conversation. Graham, the last neo-romantic properly to find his own voice, was the poet who initially was most beset by this problem. Yet not only did Graham show himself a man of good friends, he also was engaged in a vigorous debate with at least one friend on the relationship between friendship and poetic communication.

George Barker and W.S. Graham first met in Soho, and their friendship was cemented in Cornwall in 1947. At about this time, Barker composed 'To W.S. Graham'. The sonnet compares Barker, who styles himself as a carer of fountains and water vessels, and Graham, who is characterized as an angry Jason of the waves wearing a 'Golden fleece on' his 'sleeve'. This lack of the proverbial organ there prompts the question: 'Where's the heart, man, for the egoed sea to shatter/ Sea against a rock of heart?' Barker's argument with Graham concludes with some words of friendly advice: 'The mermaid with immortality in her hair/ Will rise to you the hour you sink to her.'<sup>48</sup>

Part of Barker's problem with Graham's unbefriending style must be a lack of particulars and the quotidian. Certainly is taking issue with that mixture of sea, sublimity, high style and ego that we get in works such as 'The White Threshold'.

Graham was to explain himself in a revealing letter to Edwin Morgan:

The sea in *The White Threshold* is a constantly changing symbol. It is variously – the Continual Arrival from 'otherness' – the element through

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<sup>48</sup> George Barker, *Collected Poems*, p. 251.

which we all move and with the urge to really contact and share with the other 'inner sea' of other people and break the centre aloneness. Yet the centre aloneness is the greatest joy and gift from Him. If sharing it were easy it would be nothing.<sup>49</sup>

Compare this to the essay George Barker published in 1950 as 'Letter to a Deaf Poet', the deaf poet being David Wright

it is not the pathos of our essential incommunicability, the silent loneliness of every individual, that seems so total; but our conviction that this isolation of every creature is only relative. For, sometime, we feel, if only briefly that we can speak to each other: this is the pathos. And when George Berkley proved the totality of this delusion, when he showed each of us that no one else existed, he demonstrated at the same time the suicide of his own proposition....Because the common heart of every single creature ... is absolutely incommunicable in its loneliness. ... The heart of every man is in Coventry and can be reached by one operation and one only, and this is the working of love. I am so convinced of this truth that I would define love simply as the equation, the only equation, which proves that there are other people in the world beside one self.<sup>50</sup>

Though neither Barker nor Graham is a philosopher, both are dealing, more or less philosophically, with a central problem of high neo-romanticism: solipsism.

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<sup>49</sup> W.S. Graham, *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W.S. Graham*, ed. Michael and Margaret Snow (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 92

<sup>50</sup> George Barker, *Essays* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1970), p. 51

George Barker, respecting the logic of the move begun in ‘To David Gascoyne’, has reached anti-solipsistic conclusions. W.S. Graham, relishing both aloneness and stressing the difficulty of true communication, has not. There is still a gulf between W.S. Graham the poet and W.S. Graham the frequently entertaining, chatty and communicative letter writer. The volume *The Nightfishing* goes some way to overcome this, but not so very far. The ‘Seven Letters’ aren’t letters like the letters posthumously collected in *The Nightfisherman* are letters. Mooney’s is not a real pub with friends in it as it is in later Barker poems such as ‘Elegy’ (for all the mermaids). Instead, Graham drifts to sea giving no more than a wink to old drinking companions: ‘Mooney’s called Closing and/ Three standing men in a sculled/ Boat brimming slowly’.<sup>51</sup> In his review of *The Nightfishing*, Barker complains, quoting ‘Letter IV’:

We are all children  
We must all die  
Except Willie Graham  
The fairest of them all.

I experience a moment of acute embarrassment as Graham’s *alter ego* steps so self-consciously into that old song. For there is only one person inhabiting these poems, and this is the poet’s heroic image of himself larger than life, over-blown and overdone.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> W.S. Graham, *New Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber 2004), p. 126.

<sup>52</sup> George Barker, ‘A Cripple and a Masher: Spender and Graham’ in *Essays* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1970), pp. 60-63 (p. 63).

At this stage it seems Barker has the evidence and argument on his side.

W.S. Graham's last two volumes respond with difficult care and caution to the urge to represent friendship within the poetry, tacitly acknowledging Barker's argument, but being far more circumspect and wary in their procedures than is Barker. There are references to identifiable friendships; there are more and more devices from letters, now much closer to the actual letters Graham wrote to his friends. Nevertheless, the poems are beset by difficulties with language and communication and by other problems between friends, including money. As Peter Robinson makes clear in his essay 'Dependence in the Poetry of W.S. Graham', friendship and dependence can be seen as two sides of the same coin.<sup>53</sup> Despite that dependence, Graham is also very keen to display his largesse. Thus, in 'Wynter and the Grammarsaw' Graham plays the king bestowing extravagant titles on the benevolent Wynter, titles such as 'Sir Longlegged Liker'.<sup>54</sup> The very profusion and ridiculous grandeur of the ennoblements betrays a need to bestow extravagant gifts, to dominate and be lordly, and to let it become a mutual joke: it is as if the Prince of the Appletowns had brought a friend into his game.

Derek Stanford recalls Graham's gift-giving in the pub: 'When he won an Atlantic Award a couple of years after the war, he did not possess the proverbial two pennies. No sooner had he his £200 cheque than he insisted on buying us all doubles, even unto the third time of asking. One night's drinking with some friends cost him about £8.'<sup>55</sup> In the context of his life, and the etiquette of the gift economy that is the

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<sup>53</sup> Peter Robinson, 'Dependence in the Poetry of W.S. Graham', in *W.S. Graham: Speaking Towards You*, ed. Hester Jones and Ralph Pite (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), pp. 108- 131.

<sup>54</sup> W.S. Graham, *New Collected Poems*, p. 184

<sup>55</sup> Derek Stanford, *Inside the Forties: Literary Memories: 1937-1957* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1977), p. 139.

round among drinkers, Graham's behaviour is not so quixotic. It is forgivable not to buy a round when hard up, and it is considered mean-minded to keep too close a reckoning on who has paid what. The understanding is, however, that in good times more rounds will be bought. Rounds are like poems between David Gascoyne and George Barker. One doesn't have to reply the next week, but at a suitable moment, if the muse and the occasion give one the wherewithal, one should. Those who, like David Archer, have stood many a pint, are entitled to a generous return. Graham in 'Wynter and the Grammersaw' is merely taking this principle to extremes, and enjoying being the gift-giving chieftan for the day.

Once Graham did fill a poem with the pleasantries of friendship, he was confronted with the question of whether what emerged was less of a poem, and therefore also less of a gift: 'Of course I try to separate/ Any regard for you from the made/ Object before me'. Graham havers, referring to art works, and no doubt to discussions about Wynter's art, but also trying to keep up a poetry of impersonality – a poetry which would have the universal validity of money, rather than the affective quality of the gift – while getting personal.<sup>56</sup> Similarly the frailty of friendly chat keeps tripping up:

Maybe we could have a word before I go  
As I usually say. I mean there must be some  
Way to speak together straighter than this,  
As I usually say.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> W.S. Graham, *Collected Poems*, pp. 186-187.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p.187

Can a poem tolerate the friendly to and fro of usually spoken cliché, the habitually saying something, if something is usually said? Is it the poem or the chat which is lacking? The reflexiveness here, though now outward-looking, still has that acute self-consciousness of performance Barker criticized in his review of *The Night Fishing*.

When the older Graham felt truly obliged to mark an occasion for the sake of friendship, he has to be awkward about it, as in 'An Entertainment for David Wright on His Being Sixty': 'I like you fine but this/ Writing before people/ To a man because he's sixty/ Escapes me'. It neither fits the urge for spontaneous acts of generosity nor the continuing distrust of the occasional. The problem is circumvented in 'Private Poem for Norman Macleod' in Graham's last book *Implements in their Places*, where he points out 'Your visit *was* a grand occasion' (my italics). Moreover, Graham writes to his recent visitor from America: 'I don't think I will ever see you again', putting the poem in that familiar neo-romantic territory of the quasi-elegy to the living.<sup>58</sup> This seems all the more fitting given the odd glitches of early Graham, which in practice means Dylan Thomas, or in this case Thomas and Watkins, 'the white/ Pony of your Zodiac' trotting in from 'Deaths and Entrances'; this in turn reminds us the old negotiations of the neo-romantic friendship poem since 'Portrait of a Friend' are being played out again..<sup>59</sup> This time though, they are played more explicitly, even in relation to money and how the poem, apparently a gift to Norman Macleod, also takes part in the wider economy: 'But this, my boy, is the poem/ You paid me five pounds for': is it the faceless editor of a magazine or even Macleod himself here, unsettling the deal.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 225

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.226.



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*Among the first groups of beings with whom men most have made contacts were the spirits of the dead and the gods. They are in fact the real owners of the world's wealth. With them it was particularly necessary to exchange and particularly dangerous not to.*<sup>60</sup>

Graham's greatest friendship poems write about the dead as if they were still alive. But, in place of Barker's keeping up of jokes, banter and debate whilst addressing a disintegrating corpse, Graham has a less embodied dialogue with friends' ghosts which has a tendency to reverse the actual condition of remembering the dead, as when he asks Peter Lanyon to 'Remember me wherever you're listening from' in 'The Thermal Stair'.<sup>61</sup> The poems do not let the difficulties besetting friendships stop at the grave. Roger Hilton, another painter, who seems to have outdone even Graham in the destructiveness of his drinking habits, and who also was very generous to Graham in his time, is memorialized in 'Lines on Roger Hilton's Watch':

Which I was given because  
I loved him and we had  
Terrible times together.

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<sup>60</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 13.

<sup>61</sup> W.S. Graham, *New Collected Poems*, p. 166

This wordplay on the watch and terrible times has less the sound of a man bewitched by the sound of his own voice than that of a man in love with the sound of his friend's conversation. Did Hilton give him the world-toughened joke when he gave him the watch, a joke which Graham is taking out one more time? The poem holds out the possibility, and is enriched by it even as it gives the phrase back to the watch's giver and at a time when the notion of a swap can no longer be possible, and when Hilton's and Graham's gifts may be considered absolute, loving and unexchangeable.<sup>62</sup>

Roger Hilton's watch is the good friend's gift, not given in exchange for anything but to acknowledge Graham's love and what he and Hilton have shared together. The poem is also a return gift, although, given Hilton is dead, one that has no use value. It too commemorates terrible times together and is a token of his love for Hilton. The living and the dead are implicitly compared to stopped and ticking watches, and we hear the watch that is Graham declare: 'I am only a watch/ And pray time hastes away./ I think I am running down'.<sup>63</sup> It is as though Graham owes his old friend a life as well as the watch and he is in the process of repaying both.

Graham's sense of owing a friend a death is made explicit at the beginning of 'Dear Bryan Wynter:

This is only a note  
To say how sorry I am  
You died. You will realise  
What a position it puts  
Me in. I couldn't really

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<sup>62</sup> Here, again, I am following Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, pp.4-7.

<sup>63</sup> W.S. Graham, *New Collected Poems*, p. 237.

Have died for you if so

Inclined.

This style seems beyond neo-romanticism, with a careful avoidance of rhetoric or anything approaching the grand phrase, the downplaying of the grand occasion. If another poet and his register is brought to mind, it is the American modernist William Carlos Williams, whose 'This is Just to Say' is echoed in the first sentence. This is only a note, it is not a great thing that is being given, and, on this occasion, the note will not also be a musical note or a bank note; no linguistic richness will redeem this particular loss. Yet Graham is pointedly not writing something to stick on the icebox door; there is ultimately the underpinning of weight, a seriousness of occasion, much of the strength of the poem's language coming from the felt push against the urge to employ the neo-romantic register.

Indeed, the poem is more similar to 'Portrait of a Friend' than it might seem. Visitors to the recent British Museum exhibition on *The Book of the Dead* could see an Egyptian stela dating from about 2100 BC on which has been inscribed someone's letter to their dead beloved which asks: 'How are you? Is the West taking care of you since you died? Look, I am your beloved on earth, so fight for me, intercede...'.<sup>64</sup> 'Anyhow how are things?' is, consciously or no, very much the same sort of writing, another kind of Egyptianism, inscribed to the actually dead, rather than the imagined dead, friend.

If the poem enacts age-old tributes and gift giving to the dead, it is also Graham's least embarrassed and least inhibited attempt to keep up a conversation with

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<sup>64</sup> Stele, 'Book of the Dead' Exhibition', British Museum London, 4 November 2010, 6 March 2011.

This gloss was not contained in the exhibition catalogue.

a friend in a poem, and a proximity to the genuine interplay of conversation, the  
generosities too are no longer excessive, but sound, in the teeth of all evidence,  
practical:

Do you want anything?  
Where shall I send something?  
Rice-wine, meanders, paintings  
By your contemporaries?<sup>65</sup>

The simple: 'And nobody will laugh/ at my jokes like you', makes the lack of any  
conversation ache.<sup>66</sup> Graham the poet, always at a distance from, sceptical of,  
anything the other side of language, at once summons up the figure of the easy  
interchange of friends, the joke as a gift, laughter the immediate giving back, and takes  
it away: while Wynter may still 'smile' under his blue hat, it is to be witnessed only  
by dying.<sup>67</sup> Yet even in death, the old world of friends and obligations continues.  
What can a dead friend do for the living? 'Bryan, I would be obliged/ If you would  
scout things out/For me'.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.